

BLOG POST ON PUMP-OUT PILOT

It's an increasing problem that contaminates our waterways and puts our community's health at risk. It also impacts people experiencing homelessness who are staying in RVs, including depriving them of their dignity.

The problem? Spills involving human waste from RVs.

In 2019, there were almost 100 RV wastewater spills-and those are only the ones reported to Seattle Public Utilities (SPU). With approximately 2,700 people living in cars and RVs in Seattle and King County, as reported in the [latest one night count](#), and no easy way for them to safely dispose of human waste, we know many more RV spills go unreported.

"I've only driven to the dump once," said Dante, who is experiencing homelessness and currently stays in his RV. "It's dangerous due to the age of my RV. The cost and logistics are hard too."

"The stress of not having a safe bathroom is hard to relate to for most people," said Chris Wilkerson, RV Wastewater Program Coordinator at Seattle Public Utilities. "It has a huge negative impact on people's physical and mental health and on the health of the surrounding community."

So SPU got to work, creating a pilot program that could dispose of human waste and help prevent spills.

"This program was borne out of an increasing trend of expensive spills to our infrastructure, causing risks to public health and contamination to our water bodies," said Ellen Stewart, Source Control and Pollution Prevention Division Director. "We decided to solve the problem at the source by starting a pilot program to provide sewage pump-out services to RV residents on a regular schedule."

In early 2020, SPU began partnering with Saint Vincent de Paul (SVDP), a human service agency that conducts thousands of home visits annually and offers assistance to clients, some of whom are experiencing homelessness.

"The wastewater program in which Saint Vincent de Paul partners with Seattle Public Utilities is a classic public-private partnership that is good for the community," said Jim Reisteter, a SVdP volunteer. "SVdP provides a home visit offering food, clothing, gas cards, toiletries, hygiene items, and sack lunches while Seattle Public Utilities provides the pump out."

SPU staff use a large, vacuum truck to remove waste from the RVs and safely dispose of it.

"This program has made a tremendous difference in my life," said Kayla, a client who has requested pump-out services. "It has helped me to stay safe and focused on my employment."

"This program helps out a lot," said Danny, another client who has requested pump-out services. "It helps keep the area clean and lets me sleep at night with one less worry."

Through November 10 2020, SPU successfully completed 924 pump outs in areas of the City that have a high concentration of RVs.

“This project treats people with dignity and respect and provides an important and valuable public health service at the same time,” said Reisteter. “This is the kind of project we are pleased to be working on with the City of Seattle”.

“I’m proud of SPU’s work to help make this a reality for our RV neighbors,” added Wilkerson.

The pilot has led to fewer reported spills- good for our RV neighbors, good for the environment, good for our community.

BACKGROUND: Quotes and data:

“This program does a lot to help out. It helps keep the area clean and helps me sleep at night with one less worry.” – Danny RV Resident in Georgetown

“This is the best program in the world. It helps keep the city beautiful.” -Joseph a.k.a King Abdul Mumin EL Moor

“I only drove to the dump once before this program. It was dangerous due to the age of my RV. The cost and logistics was hard too. This program has helped me be still and centered and to feel safe. It has also given me an opportunity to save some money and work toward getting myself into a better place.” – Dante of Central District

“This program makes a tremendous difference in my life. I was driving to Lynnwood monthly (to dump waste). It was dangerous, expensive, and took a huge amount of time. It (the RV Pilot Program) has helped me to stay safe and focused on my employment.” – Kayla of Leschi

“My work on SPU’s Spill Response team was what first exposed me to the RV wastewater problem and provided me with the motivation to want to work toward a solution. It was extremely frustrating to cleanup so many spills of waste from leaking RVs and disheartening to have no effective solution. After ten months of working directly with the RV dwelling community to provide wastewater service; I’ve seen firsthand the positive impact the Pilot is having both on the frequency and severity of wastewater spills and on peoples physical and emotional health. The stress of not having a safe bathroom is hard to relate to for most people but is has huge negative impact on people’s physical and mental health and on the health of the surrounding community. Conversely being able to manage your waste with dignity and respect is powerful and directly improve people’s quality of life. I’m proud of our work to help make that a reality for our RV Neighbors.” - Chris Wilkerson of SPU

This program was borne out of an increasing trend of expensive spills to our infrastructure, causing risks to public health and contamination to our water bodies. We decided to solve the problem at the source by starting a pilot program to provide sewage pump out services to RV residents on a regular schedule. Providing this service is more cost effective and better for our environment. Our partnership

with St Vincent De Paul provides an added benefit of community partnership and providing needed resources to this vulnerable population. - Ellen Stewart of SPU

the point is that there are always more spills than we see. It follows then that actions which increase spills (such as growing RV dwelling populations) or decrease spills (such as the RV Wastewater Pilot) are likely having a larger impact than we see because these effects are changing all actual or potential spills rather than only reported spills. In contrast the Planned RV Pilot likely did not increase spills, but rather increased the fraction of spills which are reported. These changes in total versus reported spills also have similar impacts on the quantity of waste estimated to impact the drainage system.

- The spills information is accurate. Comparing Q1&2 of 2020 to 2019 we dropped down to 23 from 54 spills of sewage from RVs, so greater than a 50% reduction. With the caveat that this is a correlation and not proven causally as Ellen pointed out.
- The numbers listed below for our pumpouts are accurate but old. SPU has conducted 745 Pump outs as of October first. If needed I can do some number crunching to determine how many dates of service, how many different neighborhoods we've served, and how many unique RV families but that if a few hours of work, let me know your needs.

The number of people living in cars and RVs in Seattle and King County stands at roughly 2,000, according to a number of local groups which track how many people in our region are experiencing homelessness.

RVs in the City can't properly and safely dispose of their human waste within reasonable driving distances. Consequently, many illegally dump in Seattle storm drains flowing into Puget Sound or other waterways, polluting our marine environment and posing a public health risk.

SPU DWW developed a response to the problem by launching a R.V. Wastewater Pump-Out Pilot in 2020. As the pilot evolved SPU partnered with Saint Vincent de Paul (SVdP), a human service agency that conducts thousands of home visits annually and provides rent, utilities, and food assistance, to build trust and support outreach efforts with clients.

- SVdP and Seattle Public Utilities have jointly completed 30 pump out/home visit projects, helping 243 families and individuals.
- SPU has completed 745 pump outs through September 2020.
- SPU's spills calls related to RV dumping or spilling sewage have been cut in half, from 54 in the first and second quarters of 2019 to 23 in the same period in 2020.
- Although the schedule varies, the RV pump out pilot visits these parts of Seattle:
 - Aurora Corridor/Greenlake
 - Ballard
 - Georgetown
 - Leschi/Capitol Hill

- Magnolia/Interbay
- Rainier Valley
- Sodo
- South Park/West Duwamish
- West Seattle